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Framing the Text: Using Storyboards to Engage Students with Reading

Having students create visual storyboards for literature and movie scenes can improve students' reading skills. Specific classroom projects are described and student-created examples are shown.

Storyboards deliver a narrative through discrete visual representations. I have used storyboards in a variety of ways in my high school classrooms as well as with my work in teacher education. During the eleven years I taught high school, I primarily used storyboards as planning tools for student work in composing videos for my media production courses. Storyboards allowed the students to visualize the images prior to videotaping. I found this to be a helpful brainstorming activity because it engaged them in thinking about how they wanted to frame their images. Since students were dealing with time constraints for their videotaping, storyboards helped them work more efficiently because they already had planned the visuals for their project.

The purpose of the storyboards was always to *scaffold* the final product and students were free to add, delete, or adapt those images that were most helpful to their project. The storyboards served as a brainstorming activity, much like a prewriting exercise for a written paper.

However, while storyboarding worked well as a prewriting activity for composing videos, I also found that storyboards could be adapted to a number of other classroom applications. As students composed storyboards, they were actually reading them, too. In writing their storyboards, they became more astute readers of visual texts. I began to see connections with storyboards for reading other texts as well.

Storyboards are hardly a new concept. In an adapted form, they are part of the comic pages in daily newspapers, in comic books and graphic novels. In filmmaking, directors from Hitchcock to the Coen brothers have used storyboards to detail the developing vision of their work. Storyboards have even found their way into use in corporate and business communications.

It is not much of a stretch to see how storyboarding could be used in a similar manner in a classroom, especially as it is a low-tech multimodal activity that requires only paper and a writing utensil. In this article, I describe three reading activities using storyboards. The first deals with focusing on images in poetry, and the second pertains to using storyboards with reading works of fiction. The third activity details reading film passages.

Why Storyboards?

Storyboards help readers visualize a print text. We know that in teaching reading, a key element of reading a print text is the ability to visualize the reading (Beers 45), something Jeffrey D. Wilhelm calls "seeing the visual possibility" (117). Creating storyboards becomes a way of *re-presenting* the students' thought processes, detailing a visual record of their reading.

Another reason storyboards are effective with reading is that their use requires students to interact with the text. In the process of composing storyboards, students will often go back and forth between the text they are reading and the visuals they are creating. One problem with reading is that it is often seen by students, particularly reluctant

readers, as a passive activity (Smith and Wilhelm 10–11). Creating storyboards encourages students to engage and interact—or in a reader-response term, *transact*—with the text.

Storyboards can also assist with the difficult task of assessing reading. Since reading is an internal process, a difficulty exists for the classroom teacher in diagnosing how students are progressing. When students compose storyboards while reading, the visuals become an artifact of their reading, detailing their interpretations of what is being read. Student understandings (or misunderstandings) of the reading are made explicit because teachers can see a visual record of the students' reading.

The activities described below take active advantage of the benefits afforded by storyboards.

Activity #1: Interpreting Poetry with Storyboards

Since poetry invokes images through language, beginning with identifying and envisioning those visuals is a crucial place to start. I have found that using storyboards is a disarming way of reading, visualizing, and discussing a poem because storyboarding is a nonprint activity that compels a transaction with the text by creating a focus on the language and imagery. The activity centers on students finding images in the poem and then representing those in graphic form.

When introducing storyboarding with poetry I begin with Billy Collins's "Introduction to Poetry." This poem uses imagery with a series of senses and is well-suited to focusing the readers on poetic images.

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water-ski
across the surface of the poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means. (16)

In this activity, I have students select and storyboard four to six images from the poem. Although the exercise can be done with regular pens and pencils, I try to have markers, crayons, and/or colored pencils available to allow the students to represent color as well.[1] Students are given 20 to 30 minutes in which to engage the poem. I encourage them to not worry about their artistic ability. Rather, the focus is on capturing a specific image, the shape, or color of their idea.

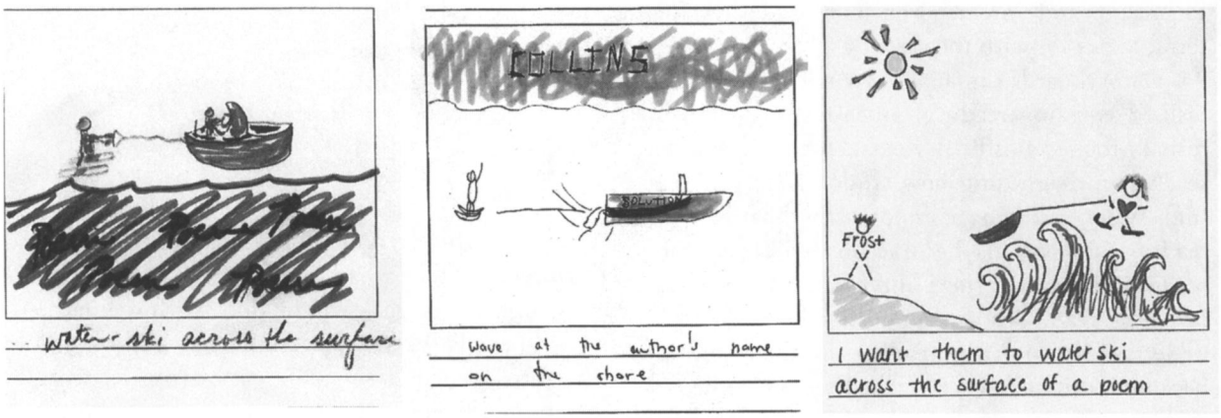
When students compose storyboards while reading, the visuals become an artifact of their reading, detailing their interpretations of what is being read.

After they have created their storyboards, I ask students to share one of their images. Since the poem is relatively short, many students will have overlapped in their choice of visuals. The conversation that typically ensues is a rich exchange about how different students envisioned an image from the poem, often focusing on the variations of how they visualized the same image. Having students evaluate their different readings of the images often offers interesting conversations for interpreting the poem without, in Collins's words, "beating it with a hose."

For example, in one class in which I used this poem, some students drew visuals about the lines "I want them to water-ski / across the surface of the poem / waving at the author's name on the shore." In the storyboards (see fig. 1) each of the representations share similarities but also differences. They all have some representation of a boat and water-skier. However, the perspective of each varies and those differing perspectives encourage a multifaceted exploration of the poem's image.

In the first storyboard, the author's name has prominence, highlighting the interaction between

FIGURE 1. Storyboards from "Introduction to Poetry"



reader and poet with the boat providing the solution to the poem. In the second storyboard, the reader has a heart and the poet has both body and name. They are on the same horizontal plane, representing what the student explained as "equal participation" between the two participants. She further detailed that the water, shown with deep waves, represented the dynamic nature of a poem. The third storyboard emphasizes the reader only (no author) skimming over the watery depth of the poem.

By drawing his or her understanding of the poetic image, each student creates a visual that is distinctly his or her own. Sharing those similarities and differences allows for a rich examination of how the students envisioned meaning in the poem.

What is interesting in the images is not the correctness of interpretation but how the student chose to represent the lines from the poetry. By drawing his or her understanding of the poetic image, each student creates a visual that is distinctly his or her own. Sharing those similarities and differences allows for a rich examination of how the students envisioned meaning in the poem, without the conversation ever digressing into the "correct" interpretation of the poem.

Collins laments that readers want to interrogate rather than explore poems, and in the process beat the life out of them. In discussing this concept, I often use the contrasting methods of studying butterflies. One way is to observe them in their habitat, closely following their movements. The other way is to splay them, pinned to a corkboard. With the former, the butterfly is still alive at the end of the observation. In the latter, it is dead. Storyboarding with images from the poem is a way for the students to engage in a close reading of a poem without sucking the life out of it.

Activity #2: Storyboarding Works of Fiction

In the process of teaching a novel, it is not unusual for a number of the students in a class to read summaries of a text—such as CliffsNotes or SparkNotes—in addition to or in lieu of the assigned work. What is the teacher to do when some students have read the text, some have read a synopsis of the text, and others have never cracked the book? In such a scenario, the easy default is to conduct teacher-led summary discussion of "what happened" in the novel.

I have found that using storyboards in conjunction with assigned reading helps mitigate this frustrating scenario and becomes a way for students to think critically about a text. In using storyboards with works of fiction, I detail several activities including variations on chapter summaries, identifying story elements, and comparing print and film interpretations of a passage.

Variations of Chapter Summaries

In the following exercise using storyboards, students are assigned to visually re-create key events in the chapter. Students search the print text for those items that they believe are important and then translate that portion of print into a visual statement. In

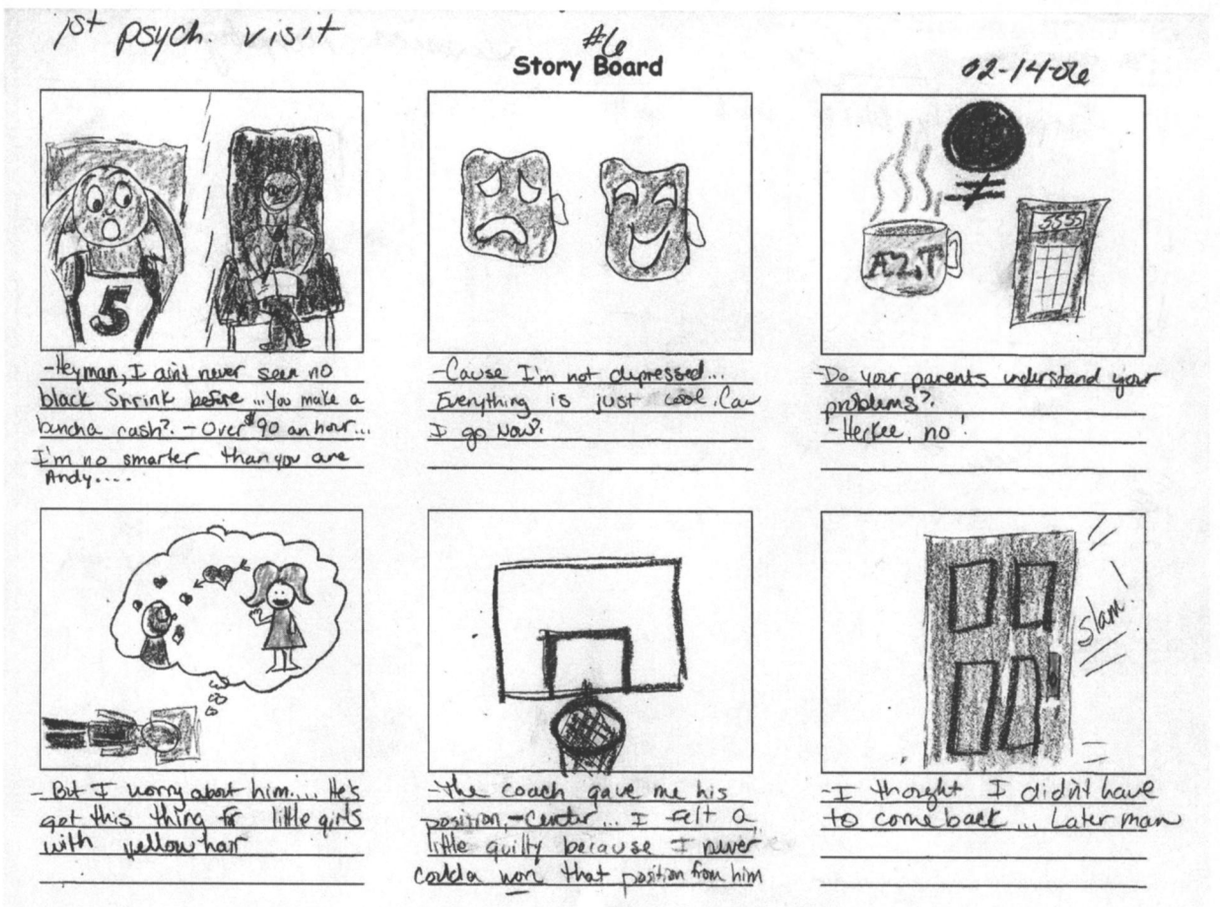
addition to the pictures, students are responsible for including corresponding quotes and documenting the page numbers. The captions are as important as the visuals, as this is a good introduction for students finding and citing significant quotes from the text.

After students have completed their storyboards, they are encouraged to share with their classmates what they have found. Again, as with the previous exercise with poetry, students often storyboard similar events in the chapter. The discussion that ensues is often a rich interchange of how they visualized the events, focusing on the surprising commonalities and variations of individual interpretations.

For example, I had my students read *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon Draper. Rachel composed a storyboard of a character's first visit to a psychologist (see fig. 2). Rather than provide a series of the chapter's sequential events, Rachel's interpretations are representations of issues and feelings that the character was relating in his counseling session. For example, in the second frame of her storyboard the character's mood is depicted symbolically through the icon of dramatic masks rather than through a literal depiction of the scene. Rachel's interpretation is that the character is hiding his true feelings, which she chose to draw through the symbol for drama. The other students thought her simple portrayal effective, conveying the sense of the character's mood effectively through the brief images. Rachel's drawings also highlight how artistic ability is less important than choices about how to portray the material. Though the visuals are rudimentary, they capture the essence of what is occurring in the story and provide an interpretation of the events as well.

A variation of using this storyboard activity for chapter summaries is dividing the chapters among the students in the classroom. Each student is responsible for highlighting the key events of the chapter by composing visuals and then sharing them

FIGURE 2. Storyboards of *Tears of a Tiger*



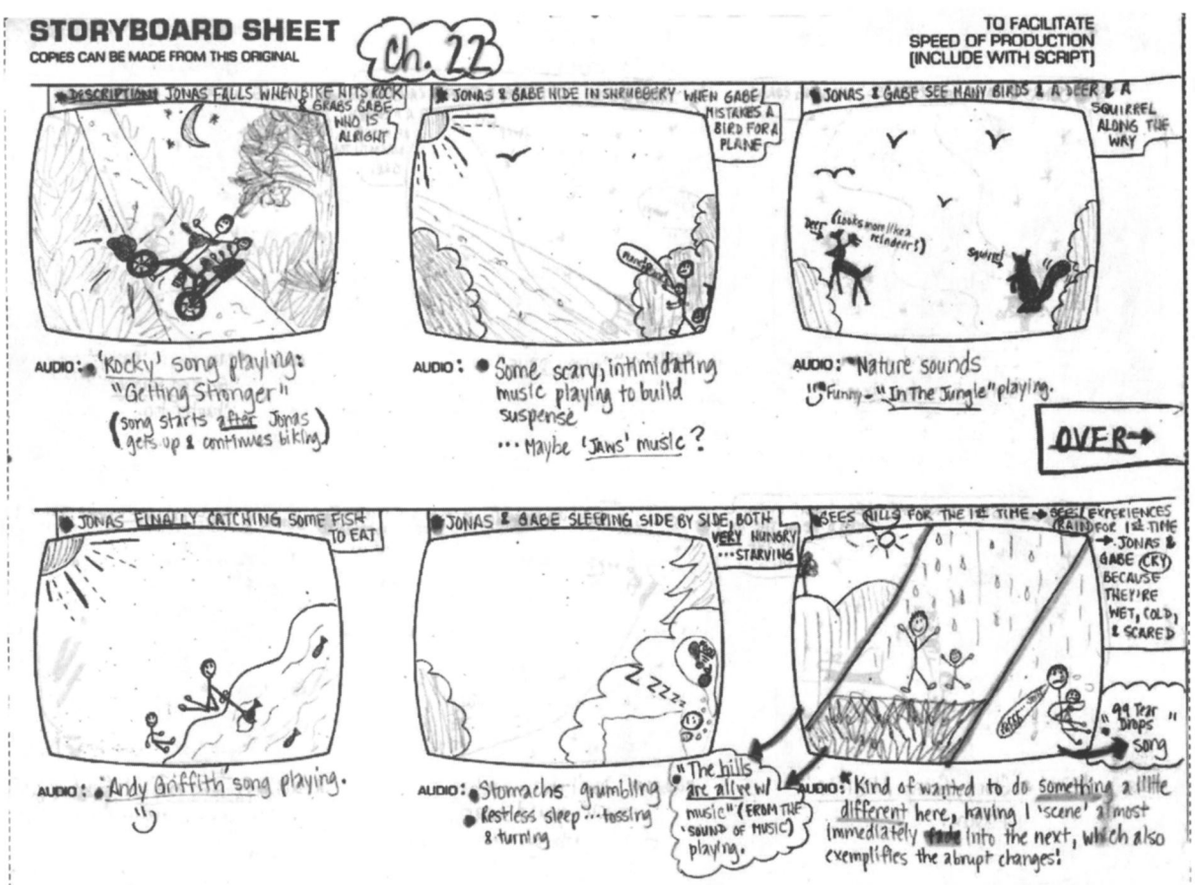
with the class. The series of storyboards becomes an important class artifact. I post the chapters on the bulletin board—or, in the past several years, to a course-related website—as the students progress through the book, forming a class-designed graphic novel. In creating a visual overview, the chapter storyboards form a documented trail through the book in which each student has made a valuable contribution. This is especially important when reading longer texts, as the visuals provide a reminder of the events that have occurred in the proceeding chapters. The storyboard wall—classroom or virtual—can also be used as a review session.

I have found that using the chapter summary approach with shorter novels can also be a rich way to talk about the text in a non-coverage manner. For example, in teaching Lois Lowry's *The Giver,* I assigned the book to be read before we discussed it in class. Each student was assigned a chapter in which he or she was to storyboard six key events. In addition, students were to include key quotes or a song that would work well with the text.

On the assigned day, students brought their storyboards to class (see fig. 3). We sat in a large circle and the students shared the events and visuals from their chapters. In one class period, we reviewed the entire book, and the discussion was led entirely by the students.

Angela's storyboard chapter of *The Giver* is a good example for two reasons. First, her inclusion of song titles allowed her to make intertextual connections between music with which she was familiar and relate it to the book. Selecting music affords interpreting the figurative tone of the scene with the aural tone of a song. The second reason is that her storyboards demonstrate that even roughly drawn stick figures can be used effectively to convey events in storyboards. This is important because I have found that students who do not enjoy drawing in any form experience some apprehension about shar-

FIGURE 3. Storyboard Chapter of *The Giver* by Lois Lowry



ing their work because they feel their visuals are too badly drawn. Emphasizing the shape or essence of a scene is often more important than artistic detail.

Identifying Elements of a Story

Another way of using storyboards with works of fiction is to provide the class with storyboard templates that have the various components of the story cycle labeled under each frame (for example, setting, conflict, rising action, climax, denouement). This activity works especially well with short stories. While students read the text, they are to create a visual—with documented quotes from the story—detailing their understanding of the story elements. This activity puts the responsibility for making textual choices on the students as they search the reading for the structural aspects of the story. Again, the storyboards become the prompt for class discussion, particularly the students' understanding of each story element as it relates to the text. Using storyboards in this fashion also becomes an easy way for assessing students' ability to identify various story elements.

Comparing Text and Film Interpretations

Another use for storyboards with fiction is to assign all the students to storyboard a single key passage of a text rather than a chapter or large section. I encourage students to compose their visuals as if they were directing a scene in a movie complete with visual and audio cues. Students are compelled to translate textual cues into a series of visual and audio re-presentations.

I follow this activity by showing a film version of the textual passage. For example, I have had students storyboard a section from *Hamlet* act 3, scene 3, particularly focusing on Hamlet overhearing Claudius's prayer. Following a discussion of their directorial choices, I show several different cinematic versions of this scene (Almereyda, Branagh, and Zeffirelli) that offer varied interpretations. As students are already familiar with the scene, the class is eager to see how professional directors chose to interpret the text.

Activity #3: Deconstructing Film

The third way I have used storyboards with my students is in conjunction with reading film. Using movies is a standard feature in many ELA classrooms,[2] whether using the film adaptation alongside reading the written work or showing a film as an intertextual comparison with a class text (for example, showing scenes from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* with *The Odyssey*).

Deconstructing a scene from a movie using storyboards allows students to pay close attention to the elements of a film by breaking a scene down into the component pieces of camera, editing, and various audio cues (score, voiceovers, dialogue, ambient sound, and audio as special effects). A deconstruction offers the chance for students to deeply interact with a movie clip through reading the component parts of a scene.

Students who do not enjoy drawing in any form experience some apprehension about sharing their work because they feel their visuals are too badly drawn. Emphasizing the shape or essence of a scene is often more important than artistic detail.

Setting up this activity requires a bit of scaffolding. I begin by asking the class to watch and listen closely to a scene. After viewing the clip (usually a short but complete sequence containing a narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end), I ask: What particular visuals stood out to you? What did you notice? What did you hear?

After a brief discussion, I divide the class into five groups, this time having each group focus on a particular aspect of the scene. One group counts the edits (every time the scene changes is an edit); one looks for how the camera is used; another listens for audio cues; another pays attention to transitions; and the last group looks for color and special effects.[3] We then watch the scene a second time. Afterward, I give the groups a brief chance to talk with one another to discuss their individual impressions before sharing as a class. Each group then presents its findings. The conversation following the second viewing produces a much richer discussion of the film text by focusing on the various layers of the scene. The class invariably ends up analyzing how complex, how constructed the scene is. Students notice nuances that were missed on the first viewing. We conclude the discussion with the question of *how* the scene's various components worked together for the overall effect.

After the whole-class exercise, their individual assignment is to select a scene from a film appropriate for classroom viewing or tied to the unit of study. I provide them with storyboard templates (http://xinsight.ca/tools/storyboard.html) and the instructions (see fig. 4). A variation is to assign students different scenes from the same film, potentially a film adaptation used alongside a class reading. By doing so, the class will share a number of different scenes from the film without anyone having the burden of doing too much.

I tend to use this activity early on in the sequence of the class, as this exercise provides a foundation for talking about film throughout the rest of the course. Using storyboards, students can visually represent their understanding with pictures and written audio cues for how they would provide a cinematic interpretation of the text.

Encouraging Multiple Interpretations

I have offered here a variety of ways to capitalize on students' visualization of text and the capacity for students to interact with a passage in a nonprint mode. These three activities using storyboards—finding images in poetry, visualizing scenes from print texts, and analyzing a sequence from a film—are inviting ways to engage students with the visual aspects of reading texts. Each of the activities has a number of different possible alternatives for classroom use.

As with any classroom exercise, storyboarding is not a reading panacea. Part of the appeal is the novelty of using visuals to provide an interpretation of a scene. Like any good activity, storyboarding can be overused to the point where the students dread it. I spread the various storyboard exercises over the

FIGURE 4. Scene Deconstruction Assignment Handout

Scene Deconstruction

You are to take one scene from a movie and break it down for its component parts. The point of this exercise is to closely read a scene, examining the parts that make it up (sound, camerawork, editing, transitions, acting, etc.) to see how the parts make the whole better. In selecting a scene, make sure that it is not too long (many students select scenes between 30 seconds and one minute) as you will be drawing a storyboard of each edit in the scene. In your selections, also be mindful that the clip has a discernable beginning, middle, and end. In your analysis you do not need to address every one of the following, but please keep these in mind:

- number of edits
- camera angles/camera work/camera movement (zoom, tilt, pan/combo)
- establishing/reaction/perspective shots
- sound effects
- score
- acting/writing/directing
- transitions
- lighting/color
- special effects

Directions:

1. Describe what the scene is about in one paragraph.
2. Storyboard the scene. If the scene has 15 edits, you will need to sketch 15 panels. Don't worry about being perfect. Capture the essence of the visuals. Note that if a scene is a repeat (for example, a conversation going back and forth between characters) you do not need to sketch the same shots over and over. Simply number the panels to indicate that the edit is a repeat of an earlier image.
3. If you do not feel like you are good at drawing, notice the shape of the images on the scene (perception, depth, where the characters and/or background is placed) and try to re-create that. Stick figures are perfectly acceptable, as is the use of color in your drawings.
4. Underneath each storyboard panel, list the type of shot being used (establishing/reaction/perspective—or a combo of the three). List any particular camera shot you notice. Also note any sound/music cue.
5. Write *how* the components of the scene make the scene work. In other words, how does the combination of types of shots, camerawork, and sound create meaning in the scene? (one to two paragraphs).
6. You will end up watching the scene a number of times. You will need to allow enough time for repeated viewings and drawings of the scenes. Use the pause button liberally!

course of a class, allowing students to become familiar with the process and to have a variety of opportunities using storyboards with different readings.

In using storyboards, students learn a strategy that allows them to closely read a text. The activity provides an alternative, particularly for those visual learners, to show their understanding of a text in graphic rather than written form. I have often found that even when not using a storyboarding activity for a class text, students who have worked on storyboarding in the past will use the languages (visual, cinematic, musical, and transactional) they have learned from those activities.

Most importantly, by providing a way for students to see how others read and understand texts, storyboarding helps students learn that interpretations are not fixed. Rather, they are subjective and mutable, and readers can interact with texts in a number of ways.

Notes

1. Images here are reproduced in grayscale, but the students' original drawings are in color.

2. For ideas for using film in an ELA classroom, see Costanzo; Golden; Krueger and Christel; and Teasley and Wilder.

3. An alternative to this activity is to use a narrative commercial. In analyzing a commercial, another element to pay attention to is text usage (the fonts, colors, language being used). A commercial is brief (most often, 30 seconds) and has a discernable beginning, middle, and end.

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Read more about using storyboards in the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan "Framing the Text: Using Storyboards with Reading," also written by David Bruce. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/framing-text-using-storyboards-30750.html